

## Previews

by Susan Benson

"You drive, okay?" David says.

I think how he used to demand that he drives whenever we went somewhere together, and how I always teased him about this being his singular male chauvinistic trait.

"All right. Is your leg bothering you again?" I ask, offering him an excuse.

"No," he whispers, pressing his thin, leather key case into my hand. His intense blue eyes lock with mine, insisting on the truth. "No. That's not it."

David gazes pensively out his window as I drive. Flecks of light from passing cars shimmer on his thick, silver streaked hair. When he feels my eyes on him, he turns. The corners of his mouth pull back into soft folds of skin at his cheeks, revealing a gleaming and genuine smile. His nose is slim and straight. His forehead is smooth and high with a slight ridge that deepens the color and keenness of his eyes. He is elegant. I cannot think of him in any way less than this.

We arrive at the Connors' only a few minutes late. They both greet us at the door as always. Playing bridge with them on Sunday nights has become our way of stretching out the weekend. Donna and Brad, like David and I, have a considerable age difference between them, which makes the friendship a lot more comfortable. And we all enjoy the relief of superficial conversation almost exclusively about bidding rules and strategies of bridge. But lately David has grown agitated and inattentive. He'd even mentioned begging off the game tonight, but we couldn't do that at the last moment, we decided.

"I'd kind of like to just sit and listen to some music with you guys tonight," David announces while Brad hunts for cards in the desk drawer.

"What! And deprive Donna and I of our greatest pleasure in life—killing you and Jane at bridge?" Brad is grinning and holding up a box of cards, "Nothin' doin'. I've located the weapons."

"No, really, Brad, I'm serious."

Donna Connors intervenes, sensing David's raw mood.

"All right, David," she says warmly, "let's pick out something you'd like to hear." She's holding David's hand and agreeing with him, "I think it might be a pleasant change."

"We can do both, then," Brad says, scurrying to the stereo. "What shall it be?"

David feels challenged by Brad's compromise. His face flushes as he cannot now recall a single piece of classical music. Not a title nor a composer.

"Well," Brad coaxes, "some Chopin, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky —"

"Yes, Tchaikovsky," David cuts in.

"Which piece?"

"It doesn't matter! Surprise me." David's voice snaps electricity into the room.

"Could I review the bidding again, please?" It is the third time David has asked about the same hand. He bounces his leg nervously under the table.

"Sure, of course," Brad says enthusiastically. "If there's one thing bridge players don't do enough, in my opinion, it's asking to review the bidding. I'm always trying to get Donna to do more of it, right, Hon?"

Donna just cocks her head to one side, shooting a warning glance at Brad. She knows her well-meaning but tactless husband has said too much. Her look goes unnoticed and Brad continues, "Let's see now, it went: one club, pass, one heart —"

"Cut the crap, would you, Brad! I really hate your patronizing me like this," David blasts. "If I lived and breathed bridge like you do, I could remember every bid and card played, too! But who the hell wants to!"

The four of us sit in agonizing silence. I wonder if this will be the end of our last remaining friendship.

Moments later we're at the Connors' door. David's still apologizing and explaining how extremely stressed he's been. Brad and Donna understand, they say. We're all really tired.

David stays in the bathroom long after the shower stops running. I listen, and can hear him swishing creamy whiskers from his razor through water in the basin. Finally, the water gurgles down the drain, and I envision his whiskers there, still clinging to life at the sides of the bowl. The small drawer where he keeps his razor opens and closes. Two metallic slaps against the tile wall tell me he's bent over drying his face without removing the towel from the ring. He does this because he has trouble hanging it back up the way I do. I feel especially close to him, and I wish he would come to bed so that I could hold him, and tell him this. But I know, having watched him many nights through small openings left in the bathroom door — I know that he's standing deathly still, staring at himself as if at a stranger in the mirror.



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I feel a glow on my cheeks from walking briskly through the old cold of London's jigsawed streets. This is a benevolent cold, I muse. It's like a thermostat control on the heat generated by nearly seven million people competing for life in a space about the size of Maine. Like a dewy, cold poultice that soothes and suspends the decay of the ancient and aging buildings and people it touches.

This trip is going to be good for us. Even though it's business for David, the change of scene and the nights to ourselves will be a relief.

"It's not here, mum," sniffs the clerk.

"But I left it this morning on my way out." I'm sure the room key is not in my purse, but I juggle packages and feel around for it anyway.

"Couldn't I just have a duplicate?" I ask. This is a mistake. I must now suffer a lecture about how duplicate keys are contrary to the hotel's policy. I am curtly reminded that the dropping of keys at the desk when leaving is for my own protection and convenience. The clerk makes a notation that number 256 has been issued a second key. He says something about an additional charge which I only half hear over the rustling of my packages while I run to grab the elevator.

I hear conversation as I approach the door. Then laughter. It's canned laughter coming from the T.V. Could David have beaten me back to the room? I pull off my left glove with my teeth and knock.

"That jerk at the desk!" I huff past David to the unmade bed to unload my packages and my irritation. "He just ASSUMES I've lost my key. I'll bet he's the same clerk who gave it to you. Gerald? I think that was the name on his badge. Short, thin, with a weird little moustache that looks like he fills it in with eyebrow pencil." I notice David. He's been standing there in his underwear. His eyes are red.

"Where have you been?" he asks simply, like he really doesn't know.

"Sightseeing. You know, the castle tour. I mentioned it last night and told you not to expect me until about six, remember?"

"But it's after seven now."

"Yeah, well, despite the incredible romance of sharing my toothbrush, I thought you'd kinda like to have your own. I also got you some aftershave and a hairbrush." I'm dumping the items out of the bags and holding them up for his approval.

David's shoulders sag. I know he is thinking about his shaving kit on the sink at home. He had taken it out of the suitcase to use before leaving for London and forgotten to replace it afterward. He is thinking about the garment bag left in San Francisco, and the time he neglected to check out of the hotel in Chicago. And then there was today.

"When did you finish up at the hospital, anyway?" I try to eliminate concern from my voice. We have come to London so David can observe a new procedure only being done at St. Mark's. "And I can't believe you've been watching T.V. You hate T.V."

David is now seated on the bed. He's been watching me flit about the room putting things away and starting to undress. He catches my hand and pulls me down close beside him on the bed.

"It happened again today," he says.

It feels like a match has been struck in my chest. My insides grow hot.

"We finished up early, just after one. We hadn't stopped for lunch so I headed out to find a nice pub. I don't know how long I walked, but finally I came to a sort of fancy looking one." He gently pushes the hair on one side of my face back behind my ear and follows the curve of my neck with his fingers. "I ate. And when I went back outside, nothing looked familiar. I started down the street in one direction, but that didn't seem right so I changed direction, but that didn't seem right either. I got panicky. I must have gone back and forth I don't know how many times before I thought about hailing a taxi. I could just ask him to take me to the hotel. Yes, The Hotel...I was sweating. I couldn't remember the name of the place. Then I felt the room key card in my pocket. It has the hotel name on it, you know." David smiles wryly. He picks up the new toothbrush from the nightstand where it's laying and taps my head with it. "So, I've been holed up in this bed, with the T.V. for company, waiting for you to take me out."

We cling to each other in a rocking embrace. The canned T.V. laughter is in the background. Later we walk the streets of London together in the dark.

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It is our anniversary and I am to pick David up at his office at six thirty. We have dinner and overnight reservations at The Hotel Canterbury, where we met four years ago, and where we have sentimentally celebrated each anniversary since that meeting.

I savor my afternoon-long preparation. Soak an hour in the tub. Shave my legs, my underarms, pluck my eyebrows. Apply lotion, powder, or perfume to every inch of my being. Curl my hair, and polish my finger and toe nails — I use the clear, colorless kind that is his favorite. At five o'clock I slip on his favorite black silk dress. It's the one with the button flap over the left leg. I leave the last two buttons at the bottom unfastened. A few more strokes of mascara and some shimmery lip gloss and I'm ready to go. I check myself in the long mirror in the entry way one last time. I smile, pleased with what I have done, and I'm high with romantic expectations.



When I get to his office I find him at his desk, engrossed in a recent medical publication. He extends his arm to me, but without looking up he urges, "Come here, honey, and listen to this." He reads slowly, carefully, "According to the most recent studies, a person with a family history of Alzheimer's disease stands a ten percent chance of inheriting it. That means that same person has a ninety percent chance of NOT inheriting the disease. And", he continued, finally looking up at me, "they're working on tests that can tell whether that ten percent chance even exists in a person." Now he is on his feet embracing me, "Isn't that great, sugar!" he whispers in hushed excitement. He holds my face tilted toward his and repeats the words, "a ninety percent chance that I won't have Alzheimers." He pulls me closer, his arms tightening around my waist. "You look gorgeous, by the way. Let's go celebrate."

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We see her before she sees us. She's doddering back to her room, head bent over the plastic bag she carries. Spit runs from her mouth in long foamy strands. Her eyes stare after it, watching the foam dissipate as it mingles with older saliva in the bag. David's grip weakens about my hand as he groans, almost inaudibly, in anguish at the sight of his mother. And now I feel him converting his anguish to spendable anger with faster and heavier steps toward her. "Damn it, Mother! You don't really have to do that — you can stop that. Why do you drool like that!" She lifts empty eyes to her son saying, "Well...", in a vague, questioning tone. Like she had a reason all ready to give, but can't recall it. Then her eyes liven in recognition of us and the tension lessens as she begins to speak.

"Well, I'll be damned! Where the hell've you all been?...I told 'em you'd come...where've you been?" She turns away suddenly, not caring for an answer to her question, and begins walking back down the hall, with her head bent over her bag, "Well, come on and I'll show ya the rest of the people around here...and me lookin' like this...can't I get some teeth?...that ol' bar soap — they wash my hair with it so now it don't have no shine..." She's found her reflection in a glass window embedded with chicken wire. David swallows hard as she traces the image of her frazzled hair with trembling fingers. "What d'ya suppose happened to me?" she asks.

We coax her from the window saying that we'd like her to try the new robe we've bought her.

"Hope! Hope!" she shouts to the head nurse who's been watching us from down the hall. "Come 'ere an' meet the kids. I told you they'd come." Kate introduces us to the nurse as if for the first time. Hope gently reminds her that we've all met before. But Kate does not respond. As she sits down

on a folding chair in the hall, David and I notice the familiar change in expression that signifies his mother's drift to some distant memory.

"People don't have t' know I'm from Kentucky. They never do guess it," she insists. Kate had been obsessed with correcting her accent and concealing her impoverished youth. She had accomplished both. People had considered her a refined and beautiful woman. David was always so proud that she was his mother. He tells me this often. Perhaps it is a way to remind himself of the fact. But now she seems ironically imprisoned in the memory and manner of that past.

"They said Alma Carter was a slut, you know...But I was the slut..." she stops, choking back tears, "...And everyone always said Benny had such pretty legs...Didn't your dad have pretty legs..." she declares rather than asks this question, tears winding down her craggy face. They drop against the side of the plastic bag and mix with her saliva. "Did I kill him, too?" she sobs, "I musta...or else why don't he come see me in this place?"

David is gentle now. His anger replaced by guilt as he sees her torment. "No, no, you didn't kill anyone, Mother —"

"THERE'S THAT OL' MAN THAT KEEPS GETTIN' IN MY BED!" She jumps from the chair with a vengence that coagulates her tears, and starts toward the man who has an eerie resemblance to her; the face and bearing common to the demented. "They took away my trash can. Said I can't go throwin' it at people, but how else can I get him outa there?...Benny had such pretty legs. Everybody said so...Nobody'll help me. So now I don't have no trash can...Then they don't change the sheets after he gets in it! They just say, 'Go on, Kate, just go on an' get back in bed. It's nice 'n cool in there..."

She starts down the hall to do just that. David and I stand there a moment watching her, considering what to do. Then she turns back and calls to her son, "Well...you comin'?"